

# Travel Scams

consumer**brief**

Vacations are supposed to be carefree times to relax and reconnect with nature, friends and family. However, for consumers who unknowingly book their trips through dishonest travel agents, vacations can be expensive disappointments.

According to the National Association of Attorneys General, travel scams cost consumers \$12 billion annually. Unsuspecting consumers win “free” trips, which may require them to spend most of their vacation in timeshare presentations. “Free” cruises end up costing hundreds of dollars, and a “free” airline ticket may require purchase of a second ticket at an escalated price.

Fraudulent companies promote their travel packages through the mail, by phone, unsolicited e-mail or faxes. Vacations represent a real investment of both time and money, so when planning your next vacation, remember to:

- Stay away from travel offers which use high-pressure sales tactics and have deals that sound “too good to be true” because they probably are.
- Do not be pressured into making an uninformed decision or commitment. Remember, a good offer today will be available tomorrow.
- Be extremely suspicious of postcards and telemarketers saying you have been “selected” to receive a “spectacular ‘no cost’ vacation.”
- Seek the advice of a reputable travel agent and verify your arrangements before you pay.
- If it’s possible that you won’t be able to make the trip, look into travel insurance, so that you won’t lose the entire cost of the trip, only an insurance fee.
- Learn travel vocabulary like “blackout periods,” dates usually around holidays or peak seasons when

you are not entitled to use travel discounts; and “subject to availability,” which means you may not be able to get the accommodations you want when you want them.

- Make sure you get all the details about your vacation in writing, especially restrictions, cancellation penalties, refund policies and additional charges like taxes and service fees. If they do not provide it, make sure to request it. Check to be sure these documents reflect the same terms you agreed to.
- Pay by credit card. If you don’t get what you paid for, you may be able to dispute the charges with your credit card company. However, don’t give your account number over the phone unless you know the company is reputable. Some telemarketers may say they need your account number for identification or verification purposes - they don’t. Your account number should only be used to bill you for goods and services.
- Obtain a contact number to verify your travel



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arrangements prior to your vacation and make sure nothing has changed (i.e., travel times, dates, check-in, air travel, etc.)

- Investigate charter flights. If your trip involves a charter flight, get the charter operator's name and address and check the operator's registration by writing to: U.S. Department of Transportation ("DOT"), Office of Consumer Affairs, I-25, Washington, D.C. 20590. You can also call DOT's Public Charter Office at 202-366-2396 to see if the operator has filed to operate a charter flight from the planned departure city to the planned location. Charter packages cannot be sold until DOT approves the filing.
- Keep a record. Ask the full name of the travel company and record their contact information. It may also be helpful to get the name of the travel representative who is booking your trip.
- Check out the company before you buy. Contact the Division of Consumer Affairs at 800-242-5846 to see if any complaints have been lodged against the travel firm or the travel provider.
- Be aware. Fraudulent businesses often change their name to avoid any associations with past scams.

If you suspect a travel agency or company is involved in any fraudulent activity, contact the Division of Consumer Affairs at 800-242-5846 to determine if any complaints have been filed.



**New Jersey Office of the Attorney General**  
**DIVISION OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS**  
**Office of Consumer Protection**

**NEWARK**

124 Halsey Street  
P.O. Box 45025  
Newark, NJ 07101  
**973-504-6200**

**800-242-5846** (calls within New Jersey)

**CAMDEN**

2 Riverside Drive  
Suite # 403  
Camden, NJ 08103  
**856-614-3100**

E-Mail: [AskConsumerAffairs@lps.state.nj.us](mailto:AskConsumerAffairs@lps.state.nj.us)

Web site:  
[www.NJConsumerAffairs.gov](http://www.NJConsumerAffairs.gov)

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